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BALTIMORE SUN
19 October 1984

'67 enemy strength estimates kept under wraps

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NEW YORK — The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the suppression in March, 1967, of reports showing increased enemy activity in Vietnam that would "literally blow the lid off of Washington," according to evidence introduced in federal court yesterday.

The order was in a cable from Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to Gen. William C. Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam. To make it public, General Wheeler said, would contradict the current position that the U.S. had "seized the initiative" in Vietnam.

There was little further explanation of the cable, introduced in General Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against CBS. It did not relate directly to his charge that the network libeled him in a 1982 documentary.

But that cable and others introduced by the defense set the stage for a furious debate among U.S. agencies later in 1967 about official

estimates of enemy strength. And it underlined a recurrent theme, the sensitivity of military leaders and some civilians to probable public reaction to a sudden increase in the estimates.

CBS charged in effect that a conspiracy developed to reduce the estimates of enemy strength by leaving out categories of indigenous South Vietnamese that formerly had been included. General Westmoreland claims he was libeled by the charge.

The dispute developed mainly over inclusion in the enemy order of battle — the accounting of enemy

forces — of indigenous units other than combat guerrillas. Until early 1967, the accounting had included relatively small numbers inherited from the South Vietnamese government that were regarded as worthless.

As new estimates were developed, they threatened to increase the total from fewer than 300,000 — including North Vietnamese regular units — to more than 400,000. The military argued that the irregulars never should have been included in the first place and the dramatic increase would cast doubt on the whole American effort.

The CIA argued for inclusion on the ground that the irregulars were militarily effective. No, witnesses for General Westmoreland testified, they were mainly old men, women and children.

In a compromise agreement, these units were removed from the order of battle. The effect was to reduce the total, and General Westmoreland used the lower figure to support reports of progress during a highly publicized trip to Washington in November, 1967.

Col. Edward S. Caton, chief of tactical intelligence for the U.S. command, supported the military argument yesterday. But then he went on to say that such forces laid booby traps and planted mines, weapons that caused many American casualties.

David E. Boies, attorney for CBS, promptly pointed out the contradiction. Only by ignoring the disputed categories and by "arbitrarily reducing other categories," he said, had the reduction been achieved.

He also cited a 1975 report by the House Intelligence Committee that said figures had been manipulated to show progress.

A double edge, like that in Colonel Caton's testimony, also developed from the appearance of retired Gen. Chesley Peterson, chief intelligence officer for Adm. U. S. G. Sharp, the commander in the Pacific.

But he also said there had been no reported increase of North Vietnamese into the south just before the Tet offensive. Informed that Walt W. Rostow, former national security adviser to President Johnson, had testified otherwise, he said Mr. Rostow was wrong.